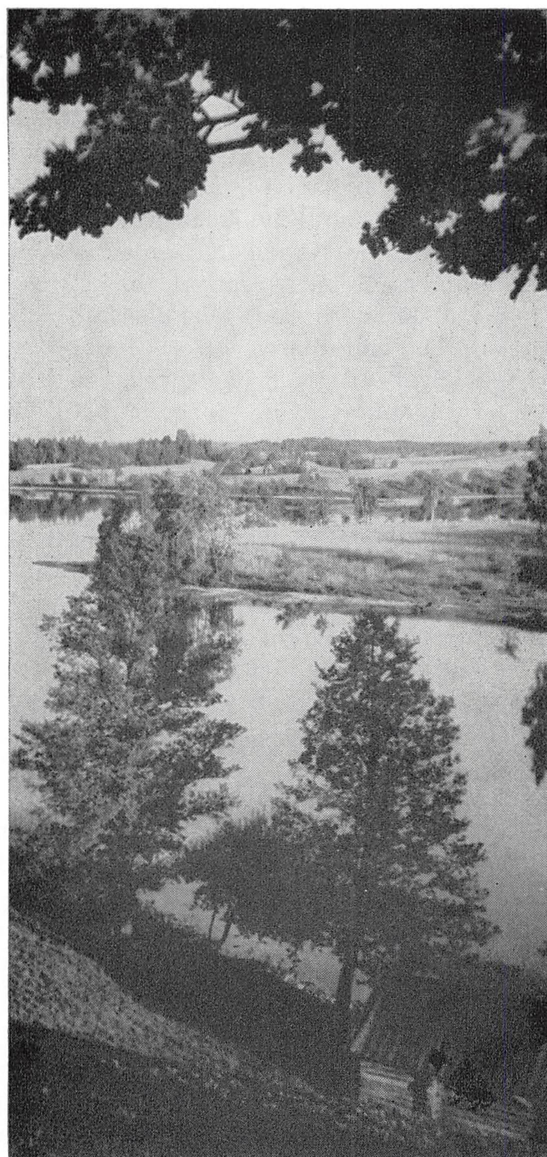
UNDER THE RUSSIAN YOKE

During the years of federation with Poland, Lithuania had known war, pestilence, famine and internal strife. But she had been relatively independent; her people were free. Now she was a subject nation. For more than a hundred years she had to suffer the loss of freedom and political, economic, and cultural oppression. Lithuanians and Poles, again united by a common tragedy, three times desperately tried for freedom. In 1812, they pinned their hopes on Napoleon, helped him in every way they could, lost, and suffered greatly. They tried insurrection again in 1831 and 1863. Both ended in disaster. After 1831, the University of Vilnius and many other higher schools were closed. The Theological Institute of Vilnius was transferred to St. Petersburg. Lithuanians were forbidden to wear national dress. After 1863, Lithuanians were forbidden to use Latin characters in printing books and newspapers. They might use the Cyrillic characters if they so wished. They did not so wish. Finally, neither schools nor books nor the right to association were left. The national spirit was to be destroyed. But all efforts to Russianize the people failed. The greater the Russian pressure, the higher the spirit of resistance. Books, newspapers were printed abroad and smuggled into Lithuania, which became a nation of book-smugglers. Every farmstead had its "book-hole." Mothers taught their children in secret. A famous Lithuanian sculpture, "The School of Hardship," portrays a peasant mother at her spinning wheel, teaching her child to read; a dog lies at their feet to warn them of the possible approach of Russian gendarmes.

Thousands of Lithuanians were imprisoned, exiled to Siberia, or executed. Tens of thousands who could not bear the Russian yoke, emigrated to North and South America, Great Britain, South Africa, and Australia. They never forgot their suffering country and aided her in every possible way.

The Lithuanians watched events in Russia and awaited a chance to make a new bid for freedom. The Russo-Japanese war gave them the opportunity to recover their press in 1904. During the Russian revolution in 1905, two thousand Lithuanian delegates met in Vilnius and demanded autonomy. This resulted in imprisonment or exile for thousands but they did obtain some concessions: they had their press, they obtained the right to cultural association, and were even permitted to build and maintain schools.



A typical landscape in the lake region of Lithuania